

By Larry Peterson  
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***They say shooting of congresswoman won't wall them off from constituents***

U.S. Rep. Jack Kingston was greeting guests at a barbecue Saturday when he learned someone had just shot one of his colleagues.

Kingston was stunned by news of the assault that left Gabrielle Giffords of Arizona critically wounded and six others dead.

But the Savannah Republican's annual event - held at an old tobacco warehouse in Alma and attended by about 400 people - continued as planned.

Kingston and other Georgia members of Congress are taking a hard look at security issues in the wake of the massacre.

But they say they'll continue the meet-and-greet forays they consider their duty - and vital to their re-election prospects.

It was at just such an event that a 22-year-old man in a line of people waiting to talk to Giffords allegedly shot her in the head.

Yet Rep. John Barrow is going ahead with four "Congress on the Corner" meetings planned for Saturday.

They've been a regular feature of the Savannah Democrat's schedule during his six years in Congress, noted spokeswoman Jane Brodsky.

"He considers these meetings to be one of the most important parts of his job," Brodsky said. "In light of the tragedy last weekend, security measures will be taken to ensure everyone's safety.

"However, the congressman will do everything he can to make sure that he is able to meet with constituents the same way he always has."

Rep. Austin Scott was equally emphatic.

"I'll listen to what the Capitol police tell us," the Tifton Republican said, "but I don't plan any major changes.

"This was obviously a tragedy, but it was an isolated incident. What makes our government different from many others is that people can meet freely with public officials."

In a prepared statement, Republican U.S. Sen. Johnny Isakson agreed.

"I am deeply saddened and disturbed by the senseless attack on Rep. Giffords," Isakson said, "but we cannot let this stop democracy.

"... It is important for elected officials to remain accessible ... An additional security bubble would ... make us less accessible. We can't let that happen."

Leslie Shedd, spokeswoman for Rep. Lynn Westmoreland, R-Grantville, said there will be "some changes" in security.

But Shedd added a "right balance" must be struck between security and public access and that Westmoreland opposes "dramatic restrictions on his ability to interact with his constituents."

Brenda Jones, a spokeswoman for Rep. John Lewis, D-Atlanta, agreed.

Lewis, Jones said, "certainly feels that members cannot run and hide ... but at the same time they must find a way to take the necessary precautions."

Similarly, Ashton McRae, speaking for Rep. Sanford Bishop, D-Albany, said Bishop wants a "balance between accessibility and security."

Shedd said Capitol police have advised members to have a staff member update local police on their schedules.

"In addition," she said, Capitol police want to hear about "strange or odd calls, visits, or e-mails."

"Previously," she added, "we would generally only report specific threats of violence."

Brodsky said Barrow's office has been in contact with local police about Saturday's events.

"Last weekend was a reminder for us to make sure we keep an eye on security," said Kingston spokesman Chris Crawford. "But I really don't feel any less safe working with Jack than I did before Saturday."

Crawford said security at the barbecue was provided by a Bacon County bailiff who wandered around with a flashlight in a holster.

"Things like the shootings sometimes do occur," said Robert Eisinger, a Savannah College of Art and Design political science professor.

Members of Congress know occasional encounters with emotionally unstable people go with the turf, Eisinger said.

But there's no good substitute for meeting people "so you can look them in the eye and sense what's bothering them," he said.

Eisinger said it's smart to inspect meeting places to make sure exits are clear "and you're not walled in and can get out if something happens."

"But if you think too much about such things," he added, "it hinders you from doing your job. If you're pre-occupied with security, you probably won't listen very well."